

On the Runway

By ReadWorks

In the seat to Louise's left, a large man in a cowboy hat and bolo tie harrumphed, and then he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his suit jacket. Leaning to her right, she watched him out of the corner of her eye. He snorted, tipping his head so far back she thought the ten-gallon Stetson would fall onto the passenger behind him.

She leaned even further to the right to get a look at the person who might, in a second, find a large sweaty cowboy hat on his lap. *Maybe a fight will break out before the plane even leaves the runway, she thought. Maybe the plane won't arrive in Beijing in fourteen hours, as planned, but will sit on the runway for sixteen or seventeen or eighteen hours, while the police come and arrest the man, and calm is restored.*

She leaned further, craning her neck, until she could see the face of the man in the seat behind the large man in the cowboy hat, who seemed to be enduring some type of fit or allergic reaction, hacking and sneezing up a storm. When Louise saw the man behind them, she nearly gasped out loud. He too wore a sweat-stained cowboy hat with a bolo tie, though his bolo tie was black, whereas the bolo tie of the man to Louise's left was dark blue. Both men were tanned, and their faces were deeply creased with wrinkles.

Perhaps the flight contained a whole boardroom of Texas businessmen flying to China. Was she surrounded by a host of men in bolo ties? Was she the only Chinese person on this flight to China? Louise decided to scan the rest of the plane. She leaned as far as she could to the right. She leaned so far that her head knocked into the passenger beside her.

For a moment that seemed to Louise to last for fourteen hours, she was sure she had just knocked into yet another angry, cowboy-hat-wearing sneezer. That's all she could imagine, anyway. No doubt the men to her right and left were in cahoots. No doubt they would blame her when the police came, and it would be their word against hers. For a fourteen-hour moment, Louise thought she would never get home.

But, no. The head she had knocked belonged to a woman who wore neither a hat nor a tie. Louise began to stammer out an apology, but the woman was quick to smile. She wasn't angry. Squeezed tight in the middle seat, Louise sat very still, with her arms pressed against her body to make herself as small as possible. The man to her left had recovered somewhat, his wheezing reduced now to a murmur. He was so large that he spilled over the armrest into Louise's space. She was as tiny as she could be.

The intercom activated with a dinging noise, signaling the start of the pre-flight briefing and safety demonstration. Having flown many times before, Louise knew by heart the instructions on how to use the oxygen mask or flotation device, in case the plane crashed on land or in water. But this particular flight attendant was the sort who took it upon himself to inject a little “personality” into the humdrum pre-flight routine.

“Alright, folks, we are preparing for takeoff, so please send your last texts and tweet your last tweets. Take your final selfies and make sure you're quick when you post them on Facebook!”

People laughed. Louise didn't think this was very funny.

The man in the cowboy hat to Louise's left cleared his throat loudly. “Tweet! What's a tweet!? Am I old, or *am* I old!?” He laughed loudly at his own joke. Addressing no one in particular, he went on. “I’m sure I’m not the only one who doesn’t get it. Where'd all the respectful young people go?”

The voice on the intercom continued with its jokes. “Folks, you've been assigned our airline's very best crew. But they decided to stay in New York, so you're stuck with us!”

This one got the Texan chuckling. He put his hands on his big belly and rocked back and forth, intruding even further into Louise's space. The plane was still on the ground, and already Louise was grinding her teeth.

In the aisle, a flight attendant demonstrated proper application of the oxygen mask. She had a big smile on her face. She thought the voice on the intercom was hilarious. *She wouldn't be smiling if she really had to use that mask*, Louise thought. *If we were barreling toward the Pacific Ocean at six hundred miles per hour, she wouldn't be smiling then.* Louise looked to her right, hoping the friendly lady would share Louise's annoyance. The lady was asleep. She snored softly. A drop of drool sat on top of her lower lip.

“Since we're headed in that direction anyway,” the voice joked, “I asked our captain to take us to Hawaii instead. Captain said, *SURE!*”

Louise wanted to cry.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Where is Louise located?

2. How does Louise feel throughout the story?

3. Louise is very uncomfortable in her seat. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

4. What do Louise's thoughts reveal?

5. What is this story mostly about?

6. Read the sentences and answer the question.

"Having flown many times before, Louise knew by heart the instructions on how to use the oxygen mask or flotation device, in case the plane crashed on land or in water. But this particular flight attendant was the sort who took it upon himself to inject a little 'personality' into the humdrum pre-flight routine."

What does the word "humdrum" mean as used in this text?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

The man to Louise's left is too large to fit in his seat; _____, he intrudes into Louise's space.

8. What causes Louise to grind her teeth at the end of the story?

9. At the end of the story, Louise wants to cry. Why might Louise want to cry? Support your answer using evidence from the text.

10. What impacts the way Louise is feeling throughout the story? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
